PARALLEL GUIDE 33
The Psalter

Summary: This chapter introduces the Book of the Psalms (the Psalter) with infor- mation on dating, historical contexts, various types and uses, and authorship. It then discusses about twenty selected psalms, with the special hope of illuminating ancient Jewish worship. It concludes by surveying Christian use of the Psalter.

Learning Objectives

• Read the Psalter or at least those psalms discussed in this chapter as you go through this lesson

• State the meaning of *selah* and *t'hllim*

• Learn the characteristics of psalms

• Identify which psalms should be attributed to David

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Look through a hymn book and identify some of the hymns that are based on a psalm and which are psalms set to music.

2. Select your favorite psalm and memorize it or at least memorize the passage you find most important. The psalms have been the "language of prayer" throughout the centuries. How do they affect your prayer life?

3. Write your own psalm, using the form for organizing the psalms you have read.

Preparing for Your Seminar

Prepare what you would like to include in a psalm that the group might write for itself. As a common task, write a psalm that expresses your lament and one that expresses your joy.

Select a psalm from your readings for further study. Psalm 110 is one example. Reflecting on this passage, follow the three steps of the Dozier method learned earlier (p. 531). You may also wish to look up the passage in other translations and in a commentary. Add to your notes as necessary, and write a two- or three-sentence statement on what the passage is saying.

What did this passage say to the community to which it was written? What were the issues that the passage addressed and how did it speak to the issues? What does the passage mean for you/the church today.

List situations in your own life to which the passage may apply. Now list the areas of possible application to the church communities in which you are involved. Choose one item from these two lists to think about. Use whatever opportunities you have in the next few days to wonder about the meaning of the passage as it applies to this situation. Waiting for an appointment, going for a walk, or commuting—all provide

a chance to discover the meaning of the passage for today. Be sure to include your search for this meaning in your time of prayer.

Additional Sources

Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament, 4th ed.* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986), pp. 540-567.

Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols. (Abingdon, 1962).

J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*, 3 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1977). For most readers this is the best commentary on the psalms. It exists in paperback at a reasonable price.

Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library Series (Westminster Press, 1962).

Chapter 33
THE PSALTER

The Book of Psalms is often referred to as "the Psalter." Both words, "psalm" and "psalter," come from a Greek word designating a stringed instrument. And the psalms are songs which were intended to be sung to instrumental accompaniment. The Hebrew title for the Psalter is a word t'hillim (tuh-HILL-im) which means "praises" or "hymns." Either title indicates a collection of songs, but the Hebrew title goes further to indicate that these particular songs were to be used in worship for the praise of YHWH. The Psalter has properly been compared to the hymnals used in Christian churches for worship services. Since the Psalter was compiled during the post-exilic period for use in the temple which was reconstructed after Ezra, it has sometimes been called "the hymnal of the second temple"—the "first temple" being the one Solomon built and the Babylonians destroyed.top

One can learn a great deal about the varying outlooks on faith of present day Christian congregations by reading the hymns they sing. The folk songs we know as ~~Negro~~African-American spirituals exude the atmosphere of the spiritual life of blacks during their time of slavery. Many of the songs popular with young people during the 1960s express their concern with environmental pollution, the Vietnam war, and social justice. Some congregations love to sing "old time gospel favorites" with their deeply personal portrayals of a loving, human Jesus. In other congregations the solid majesty of sixteenth-century chorales or the mystical tones of medieval plainsong seem more fitting to their formal worship. In a similar way, the Psalter reveals much about the religious life of Judaism in the post-exilic period.

The P writer has given us a detailed description of the normal worship carried out in the temple after the Exile. Scholars now generally recognize that the instructions given in Exod. 25-30 concerning the tabernacle and the laws in Leviticus regulating temple worship actually describe the cultic practices of the post-exilic temple. As usual the P writer transplants familiar post-exilic practices into the earliest possible part of Israel's story. While these priestly liturgical writings provide us with a picture of the formal structure of temple worship, it is the psalms which show us the richness of human life—the joy, despair, anger, doubt, and faith — that this worship expressed. The Psalter shows us more than a series of formal prescriptions, and Old Testament temple worship becomes more than an expression of dry legalism; it becomes a celebration of human life under God.

It is impossible to examine each of the one hundred fifty psalms which make up the Psalter. We can only note some of the major types of psalms and some of the cultic uses to which the psalms were put. We also say a few words about the role psalms have played in the Christian tradition.

Dating the Psalms

It is usually important to be able to date biblical material in order to understand it within its context; with the Psalter this is very difficult to do. In one sense, the problem is the same as that which we met in studying the Pentateuch: although the

present form is fairly late, much of the material it contains is quite ancient. The Pentateuch and the Psalter, in fact, both reached their present form in the post-exilic period, though the Psalter was probably compiled a century or two later than the Pentateuch. The problem of dating individual psalms, however, is much greater than the problem of dating the J, E, D, and P sources which were eventually organized to form the Pentateuch. The subject matter of the psalms is often so universal in its concern that it is impossible to identify the specific historical circumstances within which a particular psalm was written. Occasionally the internal evidence of a psalm does provide hints—Ps. 137, for example, which speaks of the difficulty of singing the songs of Zion by the rivers of Babylon, must have been written during the Exile. For the most part, however, such clues are not to be found. Dating the psalms, therefore, must be done with much caution. About the best we can do is divide them as pre-exilic and post-exilic, and there are occasions when even this division cannot be made.

Types of Psalms

The psalms are varied in their content and purpose, and scholars have classified them in several different ways. In its introduction to the Psalms, the Oxford Annotated Bible uses eight categories, and, because these are carried through in the OAB notes, we refer to these when we turn later in this lesson to look at individual psalms. In general the psalms can be grouped as either hymns of praise to YHWH or laments.

In the hymns, the psalmist praises YHWH for the things YHWH has done for Israel. The praise may be for God's general work of creation (for example, Ps. 8); for God's care and protection to an individual or to Israel itself (as in Ps. 23); for thanksgiving when YHWH has delivered the people from affliction (Ps. 30); or for all the wonderful things that YHWH has done during the history of Israel (Ps. 105).

In laments, the cry of the afflicted is raised to YHWH, asking God to bring relief. Some of the laments appear to have been composed by individuals facing personal difficulties; others appear to speak of the suffering of the nation. Whether individual or communal the laments provide ways for the worshiping community to bring its cry to YHWH.

Often a psalm of lament will show a sharp break from a cry of despair to a hymn of praise. Psalm 22, for example—a psalm which Jesus quoted as he hung upon the cross (Matt. 27:46)—begins with an expression of complete despair: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In vv. 22ff. the psalmist turns to the praise of God: "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." It seems that the psalmist, even in the despair that has prompted the lament, has faith that YHWH will answer the cry and in the strength of this faith turns the song to one of praise. In some psalms of lament it appears that the psalm was used to express a prayer before a cultic prophet—a prophet who was part of the temple staff and who gave oracles from YHWH to the person who came to request them. When the prophet delivered a favorable oracle, promising deliverance from the suffering expressed in the lament, the petitioner would then give thanks and praise to YHWH for the promised salvation. The lament with attached hymn of thanksgiving and praise contains only the words spoken by the worshiper:

petition and response; the intervening oracle from the prophet, or perhaps a word of forgiveness from a priest, is left out.

While many of the psalms are of such a general nature that it is impossible to tell exactly how they were used in the temple worship, some of them suggest specific ritual uses. We have already noted that at least some of the laments may have been sung before a cultic prophet. Such use would be somewhat like seeking out a Christian minister for counsel and receiving the help needed to face a difficult situation, or going to a priest for confession and receiving an authoritative declaration that one's sins are forgiven. The prophet's oracle assuring YHWH's favor and help would be comparable to such counsel or absolution.

There are also psalms that seem to indicate a communal liturgical use. Because so little is known of the exact nature of temple worship in pre-exilic times, scholars are not in complete agreement about these psalms, but there seems to be general acceptance of at least the following four categories:

Psalms for Specified Occasions

1. Psalm 92, for example, is called "A Song for the Sabbath." Psalm 100 is entitled "A Psalm for the thank offering." Other psalms are designated for use at "memorial offerings" (Ps. 38, for example). It is sometimes difficult for us to see the connection between such psalms and the occasion for which they are designated, but the compilers of the Psalter indicate that they were so used in the temple.

Psalms for Covenant Renewal Ceremonies

2. We have noted certain specific occasions at which Israel officially renewed the covenant with YHWH. The prime example is the ceremony at Shechem at which the people under Joshua renewed their acceptance of the terms of the covenant (Josh. 24). Josiah's reform (II Kings 23) and Ezra's reform (Neh. 8) are the two other great occasions when covenant renewal ceremonies were almost certainly held. It is likely that public reaffirmation of the covenant took place much more frequently than this—perhaps annually. Psalm 81 suggests that the covenant is remembered on a regularly appointed feast day (v. 3). A brief reference is made to the deliverance from Egypt, and then the psalm moves to recite the record of the Israelites for faithlessness. YHWH pleads with the people to walk in God's ways (v. 13) and promises blessings to them if they will (v. 16). In response to this reminder of YHWH's graciousness even in the face of their backslidings, the people renew their allegiance. Psalm 105, which has already been mentioned as a hymn of praise, may also be a covenant renewal psalm. The history of YHWH's care for the people is recited in detail as a means of urging the people to renewed faithfulness.

Psalms for and the King

3. The "royal theology," which developed in Jerusalem into what we have called the "official theology," found expression not only in the historical writings and the works of the prophets, but also in the worship of the temple. Psalms that glorify Zion, the mountain on which the temple stood, and psalms which speak in kingly terms of YHWH and of God's "anointed" or "son" demonstrate this.

Psalm 24, after praising YHWH as creator (vv. 1-2), sets forth the moral requirements of all those who would come to Zion and worship at the temple (vv. 3-6). Following this preparation, the psalm tells the gates of the temple to admit the "King of glory," who is identified as YHWH (vv. 7-10). This psalm may well have been sung at a liturgy in which the ark of the covenant was brought in procession to the temple doors. Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, and 112 are all considered "songs of Zion."

Psalms 93 and 95-99 are sometimes called "coronation psalms." YHWH is portrayed as the king of Israel, the refrain "YHWH reigns!" recurring in most of them. Israel constantly remembered in worship that, whoever might be the king on the throne in Jerusalem, it was YHWH who was the true king of Israel. In post-exilic times, there being no king in Jerusalem, the rule of YHWH was especially important. Judah could remember in worship that even though the country was under the rule of a foreign power, it and all the world were

ultimately governed by YHWH.

Still other psalms—2, 20, 21, 45, 72, and 110—glorify the Davidic king as the anointed of YHWH. Psalm 2 reflects directly the theology of the "everlasting covenant" with the house of David. In spite of the enemy nations' plots against them, the people of YHWH know they are secure under the reign of the Davidic king. YHWH laughs at the power of the nations, and declares, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill" (v. 6). The king is YHWH's "son." Some scholars think that the words "today I have begotten you" (v. 7) indicate that the psalm was sung at the time of the coronation of the king, though it is possible that the recitation of the psalm simply recalls this event in succeeding years. Psalm 110 contains imagery used by early Christians to speak of Jesus. In I Corinthians 15:24-25, Paul echoes the first verse of the psalm by speaking of the risen and ascended Jesus ruling from heaven until "he has put all his enemies under his feet," at which time he will deliver the kingdom up to his Father. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 5:6) portrays Jesus as the true king and true "priest

. . . according to the order of Melchizedek," following the imagery in Ps. 110:4. Melchizedek was the mysterious king-priest who offered bread and wine for a blessing upon Abram, who in turn gave him a tenth of all he owned (Gen. 14:18-20). Melchizedek appears in the Genesis story with no introduction and departs with no further mention; according to the record, he owes his priestly and kingly authority to no previously mentioned source. So—in the interpretation of the early church—Jesus was king and great high priest by the sole authority of his Father, having no need to trace his descent from the house of David or from the priestly tribe of Levi.

Many nations have claimed some kind of divinity for their rulers. The pharaohs of Egypt were considered to be gods themselves, and the later Roman emperors acquired virtually the status of gods. In many cultures the ruler was thought to have been descended from the gods. The king of Israel was never viewed in this way. He was the "son" of YHWH solely in the sense of being the one whom

YHWH had chosen and anointed. In the genealogy given for Jesus in the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus is traced back to "Adam, son of God" (Luke 3:38). It is quite clear in the creation stories that Adam was not the "son of God" in the ways in which other cultures would have understood it. He was God's beloved, chosen to act as God's steward over the created order. The royal psalms, though they give great glory to the king, always show him as simply the agent of YHWH; YHWH remains always the real king over the people.

All of these psalms—the "songs of Zion," the songs praising YHWH as king, and those which speak of the Davidic monarchy—presumably date from before the Exile but after the establishment of the Davidic monarchy. After the Exile, Zion was no longer the capital of a nation, with a king from the house of David upon the throne. But YHWH had promised an "everlasting covenant" with the house of David. Therefore the psalms to YHWH as king and to the anointed one as his "son" came to take on a note of future hope and expectation instead of present praise. The more Judah was to suffer from foreign oppression, the more it would look to a future time when the promises which these psalms kept before Judah would be fulfilled.

Songs of Ascents

4. Each of Pss. 120-134 bears the title "A Song of Ascents." There are many different theories about the meaning of this title, none of them wholly satisfactory. It may be that these songs were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. Psalm 122—"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"—would be appropriate to sing at such a time. (So also would Pss. 123, 125, 126, 127, 132, 133, and 134.) All of these psalms speak, directly or indirectly, of Zion and the temple. Psalms 121, 124, and 128 give praise to YHWH or express confidence in YHWH, and therefore might be considered especially appropriate for pilgrimages. Psalms 120, 129, and 130, however, are laments, and it is initially

difficult to see why they would be sung in procession by pilgrims. This opinion is based on the assumption that the main mood of pilgrims would be one of praise. Finally, so little is known about the matter that it would be unwise for us to speak too certainly about it.

A theory which was held by the Jews themselves during the early centuries of the Christian era is that the Levites sang one of the fifteen Songs of Ascents on each of fifteen steps leading up to the place in the temple where the worshipers stood. Still another theory is that the word translated "ascents" refers to a literary practice: the last word of one verse would be used as the first word of the following verse, thereby forming a "staircase" of words running throughout the psalm. In the English translation, this device can be seen in Ps. 121, where the words "help" and "slumber" play this role in vv. 1-4; the device is less obvious in the English of the remaining verses of the psalm.

In spite of some uncertainty, most scholars at the present time do regard these psalms as songs that were somehow involved in the approach of the worshiper to the temple.

The Superscriptions

5. Many of the psalms are preceded by words which give a title, author, or other information about the psalm. These are called "superscriptions"—literally, words "written above" the psalm. The superscriptions seem to have been written by the compilers of the Psalter; they are not part of the psalms themselves. They are considered part of the text. Thus, in psalms with long superscriptions which count as verse 1, the numbering will be off by one verse between the original and most English Bibles. This can be confusing when a commentary is referring to verses according to their Hebrew numbers.

Some superscriptions name the author of the psalm. A large number of the psalms in the first part of the Psalter are attributed to David. Asaph, Korah, and Ethan are also given as authors for some of the psalms, as is Moses for one psalm (Ps. 90) and Solomon for two (Pss. 72 and 127). These superscriptions should not be regarded as reliable records of authorship. They report traditions of the time of compilation, but there is no reason to think that they reflect documented evidence of authorship.

Some of the "psalms of David" may be better called "psalms to David" or "for David"—that is, psalms in some way associated with the king, whether David himself or a successor of the house of David. While it is possible that David wrote some of the psalms that bear his name, the tradition that he was the author of so many of them no doubt springs from the accounts that portray him as a musician and—in the Chronicler's version—one who was greatly concerned with the ritual and music of the temple. The Psalter is associated with him in much the same way that the "wisdom" literature is associated with Solomon or in which the Pentateuch is frequently called "the books of Moses."

Asaph, Korah, and Ethan are mentioned in I Chron. 6:31-48 among those David appointed to be in charge of the music of the temple. The psalms assigned to these musicians are probably songs that were sung by the temple choirs which bore their leaders' names. Those credited to Moses and Solomon were probably assigned to them because someone thought the subject matter they contain suggested such authorship.

The superscriptions often contain directions to the choirmaster. The meaning of these directions is generally uncertain, but most seem to indicate the tune to which the psalm was to be sung or the preferred instruments for accompaniment. Some of the directions can be translated, but in some the Hebrew word itself is of unknown meaning. The superscription of Ps. 22 reads, "To the choirmaster: according to The Hind of the Dawn." It is possible that "The Hind of the Dawn" was a popular song whose melody was well known, and that the direction indicates that the psalm is to be sung to this tune. Psalm 77 is to be sung "according to Jeduthun"; what this means is unknown.

Though not part of a superscription, the word “Selah” also appears frequently as a liturgical direction for the performance of the psalm. What it means is not certain: it may indicate a pause, a musical interlude, or a place where a refrain is to be sung.[top]

Division into Books Psalms

Like the Pentateuch, the Psalter is divided into five books. It should be remembered that the final editing of the Pentateuch and the compilation of the Psalter both took place during the post-exilic period and under the same influences. Since the subject matter of the psalms does not itself indicate a grouping into five books, it must be assumed that the division is in imitation of the five books of the torah. Each book of the Psalter ends with a doxology—a short hymn of praise. These doxologies are found in Pss. 41:13, 72:18-19, 89:52, 106:48 and all of Ps. 150.

Selected Psalms

We now examine a few representative psalms. Please read the introduction to the Psalms in the OAB and refer to its footnotes. We follow the same type-classifications outlined in this edition of the Bible.

Psalm 1

The Psalter begins with a “beatitude,” an invocation of blessing:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of the scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

The first psalm is a “wisdom” song, a hymn that stands both as a word of comfort to those who keep God’s law and a guide to the living.

The Hebrew word translated “happy” in the NRSV derives from the verb that means “go straight, go on, advance.” This is not happiness in the sense of elation, but the happiness that comes with sureness of purpose. That sureness of purpose comes from taking “delight in the law of the LORD,” meditating on it “day and night.”

We have mentioned Solomon as a writer of “wisdom” literature. In the next chapter in this book we examine some of the wisdom literature found in the Old Testament. While there is great variety to be found in this kind of writing, one single characteristic runs throughout: it teaches general truths, universally applicable.

Psalm 1 shows a family likeness to wisdom literature. It makes general statements about two kinds of people —the righteous and the wicked. It depicts two opposite ways of life, one of which leads to blessedness and the other to destruction. It gives advice to all: the wise course is that of righteousness.

This sharp division of life into two ways resembles the interpretation found in the Deuteronomic history: loyalty to YHWH results in blessing, and unfaithfulness to YHWH—doing “that which is evil”—results in curse. The righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. We have drawn attention before to the problem presented by this expectation in the face of facts that demonstrate that it is often not true. Psalm 1, however, should not be taken as a theoretical statement, but as a hymn intended to encourage the worshiper to follow the life of righteousness. It is an affirmation of faith in the way of life which YHWH has commanded for the people—a

hymn that calls the way of righteousness a “delight” and affirms happiness (blessedness) for the one who follows it.

Psalm 8, 104 and 19

These hymns of praise speak in awed tones of the majesty of God the Creator.

Psalm 8 is one of the greatest of the psalms, and, because it is an extremely rich poem, one of the most widely discussed. It is about creation and also about the role that humankind is to play in God’s creation.

In the vastness of the desert night’s dark sky, humankind seems insignificant. Yet— and this comes almost as a surprise—God has made human beings “a little lower than God” (v. 5). The Hebrew here is ’elohim, and the NRSV translates “God,” but the reference is more likely to the heavenly court that surrounds YHWH, who is addressed in v. 1. So both the KJV and the German Zuercher Bibel translate “angels.” In either case, it is clear that God cares for humankind. Indeed, so much does God care for us, so dearly does God value us, that God has crowned us with “glory and honor” (v. 5) and given us “dominion over the works of [his] hands” (v. 6). That is both wonderful and frightening.

It is wonderful that God cares so much for us; it is frightening that the same “us” are expected to pass along this care to those we have been given care of, “the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea” (vv. 7-8). If those are in our hands in the same way that we are in God’s hands, then we must value and cherish them, the same way God values and cherishes us.

For humanity to count as important at all, let alone be worthy of exercising dominion over the creation, is the result of sheer grace on the part of the Creator. Therefore the psalm ends on the same note of praise with which it began—“O LORD our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

Psalm 104 expands the praise of the Creator. This psalm is very similar to one written by the Egyptian Pharaoh Akh-en-aton in the fourteenth century BCE. His hymn to the sun, the god Aton, parallels in form and content the later Old Testament psalm. There is no reason to assume that the theology of the psalmist was borrowed from the ancient Egyptian king, for it expresses with few alterations the Priestly creation epic, but it is possible that the Egyptian hymn, having become part of the literary heritage of the ancient Near East, was known to the psalmist.

The creation epic is echoed for one simple reason: to affirm confidence and trust in YHWH. YHWH has provided for all forms of life. The waters of the deep are kept within their bounds (vv. 6-9); life-giving water is provided for all of nature’s needs (vv. 10-13); food, wine, oil, and trees are given for cattle, people, and birds (vv. 14-17); the mountains and rocks give homes for animals (v. 18). Sun and moon mark the passage of time—as they were said to do in the P story. But—not said there—even the darkness is created by God to allow the beasts to come out of the forest (vv. 19-21). When, in the rhythmic pattern the Creator has decreed, the animals of the night retire, the sun gives light for humans to go forth to their work until the evening (vv. 22-23).

The wonders of life on the dry land are great—“O LORD, how manifold are thy works!” (v. 24) But the wonders of creation do not stop at the edge of the dry land—the sea also teems with “things innumerable” (v. 25). The ships go on the sea—a most ordinary observation. But the confidence of the psalmist in the power and goodness of the Creator is heard in the echo of the P writer’s bold assertion that even the “chaos

monster"—the "Leviathan," a term which along with "Rahab" is often used for the frightening monster of the deep—lives in the sea by God's decree and with God's favor. God made the extraordinary Leviathan specifically to sport in the sea! (v. 26)

Food and all blessings come from the hand of the Creator. When God gives, all are satisfied; when God withholds favor, all die. But death itself is not greater than YHWH, for when God sends forth the Spirit, life is recreated, and God renews "the face of the ground" (vv. 27-30). Because of all this, the psalmist praises God and promises to continue to do so "while I have being" (v. 33).

Psalm 19:1-6 is similar in mood and imagery to Ps. 104. The picture of the sun coming forth ("like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy. . . . Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them") is similar to that in Akhen-aton's "Hymn to Aton." The firmament declares God's handiwork, but in a way that is beyond words. "Day to day pours forth speech," yet "there is no speech." "Night to night declares knowledge, yet their voice is not heard" (vv. 2-3). What is described reminds us of what medieval English poets called "the music of the spheres," a symphony inaudible to human ears but nevertheless sounding—in most harmonious orchestration—the orderliness of the creation.

Verses 7-14 are a later addition to the psalm. Indeed, they may have been attached to provide a kind of corrective. Perhaps a writer uncomfortable with YHWH's being so completely revealed through nature inserted these verses to assert that God is known mainly through the law. But, although the parts seem to take completely different directions, the psalm has been preserved for us as a unit, and it came to be sung as one song. This was possible because YHWH was understood as giver of the law. It was this that the "music of the spheres" celebrated.

The same God who created the sun gives the law. And just as the sun is necessary to the physical life of humankind, so the law is necessary to our spiritual life. "For the law of the LORD is not merely statutes, arbitrary regulations, commandments which might have been otherwise: it is a revelation, full of grace, of that fundamental law of all existence which lies in the plan of creation, which must be followed if one is not to collide with the basic laws of life and perish; God's moral and religious law is—to use a modern term—as essentially 'biological' law as the 'natural' laws of physics . . ." (Mowinckel, vol. 1, p. 91).

It is God's physical laws that create the natural world; also it is God's testimony, precepts and ordinances that create the possibility of human society. It is God's law that prevents human beings from harming one another; more important, it urges human beings to be good to one another; finally, it manifests God's presence among the people as a living, caring presence.

Psalms 14 and 53

Psalms 14 and 53 are almost identical—the one major difference being the use of the divine name. In the Hebrew text Psalm 14 uses the name "YHWH" while Ps. 53 speaks of "Elohim." Psalms 42-83 generally use the name Elohim, and this group of psalms is sometimes called "the Elohist Psalter." It would be going beyond the evidence to ascribe the "Yahwist" psalms to the J writer and the "Elohist" psalms to E, but it is possible that at least some of the "Elohist" psalms—like E's work—are of pre-exilic northern origin.

These two psalms lament over the wickedness of humankind and look forward to the time when YHWH will bring deliverance so that the foolishness of those who ignore and ridicule him will be shown up. The first verse, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'" was used by some of the great medieval Christian theologians as a starting point for their attempts to demonstrate the existence of God by logical arguments. The psalmist, however, is not addressing intellectual atheism, but speaks to those who have been led so far astray by sin that they act as though God cannot see their wickedness. They are denying God in their hearts,

and for the Hebrew, the heart was the place in which decisions for action took place.

Psalms 15, 24, 42, 43, and 122

Psalm 122 is one of the "Songs of Ascents." The most widely accepted interpretation of these songs is that they were sung on pilgrimage to the temple. The content of this song suggests that it was composed by a pilgrim returning home from a festival in Jerusalem. The pilgrim reflects on the pilgrimage to the holy city, describing first the joy on arrival (vv. 1-4a). The pilgrim has joined others in the great festal gathering according God's decree (vv. 4b-5). The psalm closes with an invocation of blessing on the holy city. This song exhibits the stairlike pattern mentioned above; something of the pattern can be seen even in the English translation. Notice the repetition of the words "Jerusalem" (vv. 2b-3), "tribes" (v. 4), "thrones" (v. 5), "peace" (vv. 6-7), and "for [the] sake [of]" (vv. 8-9).

The other psalms—15, 24, 42, and 43—are psalms for use in preparation for worship at the temple. Psalm 15 describes the kind of life which a worshiper on God's "holy hill" (Zion) at YHWH's "tent" (the temple) should live. Who shall come into the community of God's people? That is the question as this psalm asks it. The answer is a lengthy list of necessary moral qualities: doing right, speaking truth, doing no harm to neighbor or friend, and so forth. It is a reminder that every community must set standards for membership. Verse 5, which speaks against lending money at interest, is not a general condemnation of such a practice, but reflects the teaching of the law that Israelites shall not treat fellow-Israelites this way. It is alright to charge interest to those who are not members of Israel! (Yet do not forget that along with Lev. 19:19, which enjoins love of neighbor, there is Lev. 19:33 and its counsel to love the alien.)

We have commented on Ps. 24 above. Besides setting forth the characteristics of the worthy worshiper (vv. 3-6), the doors of the temple are told to open for the entrance of YHWH—probably for a procession of the ark.

Psalms 42 and 43 are one psalm in the Hebrew. Although most translations print them separately, we can see that they are linked by the refrain running through 42:5, 42:11, and 43:5.

Why so downcast, my soul, why do you sigh within me? Put your hope in God: I shall praise him yet, my saviour, my God. (Jerusalem Bible)

The pilgrim, detained from making the trip to worship at the Temple, longs for the opportunity to stand in the presence of YHWH.

The first four verses of Psalm 42 form one of the most beautifully constructed poetical units in the Psalter. The imagery throughout is of a liquid. The psalmist in exile, away from the temple in Jerusalem, the "home" of his God, thirsts in the soul for God, longs for God as the doe longs for running streams. When shall the psalmist see God again, the Lord who is as necessary for the survival of the poet's soul as water is necessary for physical survival, who is the basic element in the nourishment of the spiritual life? As it stands, there is nothing with which to slake this thirst but the salt water of tears, and that does not satisfy thirst, it only increases it; it burns in the parched throat and nauseates the empty stomach. Then the psalmist remembers. In memory the poet is on the way again "to the wonderful Tent," to the house of God, among cries of joy and praise and an exultant throng (v. 4, JB).

The psalmist's soul melts within him. That part that had been thirsting for God in vain until it had dried and shrunk, and—watered only with salt tears—had shriveled, now comes to liquid life.

The dominant imagery in the last small section (Ps. 43) is of light. The psalmist continues to feel separation

from God and longs for return. But now the language used demonstrates the physical possibility of return. By God's light, the poet will be able to find the way back to the holy mountain. And it is understood in spiritual terms: by God's truth the psalmist shall be guided to the place where God is. The psalm as a whole begins in lament, but that lament turns into eager expectation of the pilgrim's arrival at the temple and the movement "to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy" (Ps. 43:4). Throughout the sorrow of the lament there rings a joyful note of celebration as the major tone of temple worship.

Psalm 22

The opening verse of this lament has been made famous for Christians by Jesus' use of it at the time of his crucifixion. Some sickness has come upon the psalmist, who feels rejected by YHWH. Other people, seeing this miserable condition, taunt the poet for believing in God—"He committed his cause to YHWH; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" (v. 8) Approaching death is described by means of several figures of speech—including the piercing of his hands and feet (v. 16). Those around the psalmist have already begun to divide up the possessions—"they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots" (v. 18). It is impossible at this date to determine how much the early Christians found this psalm fitting the actual details of Jesus' death, and how much the telling of the crucifixion story was shaped by the details of the psalm. The motif

of suffering and rejection is common to each—the passion of Jesus and the suffering of the psalmist—and the Christian evangelists recognized it.

That Jesus used the opening verse of the psalm at the time of his own passion is completely in keeping with the use intended for the Psalter. Even though a psalm might have been written by a long-forgotten individual, the Jewish community and its individual members could use the words to express their own feelings. Jesus may well have found his circumstances such as made the ancient psalmist's words appropriate.

The psalm, as do many laments, moves from the statement of the complaint to an affirmation of trust in YHWH. Notice particularly the move from lament to praise in vv. 18-19.

The power of the lament may be particularly evident in vv. 14-15. The imagery shifts rapidly: first the lamenting psalmist is liquid, and then dust. But undergirding both images is a second level of imagery, imagery of heat and of weakness.

The psalmist understands both of these feelings; Judah is a land whose late summers are particularly hot and dry. The poet is aware of heat that not only surrounds but also permeates to exhaustion, aware of a thirst that affects not only physically but mentally, even spiritually, draining to desolation. These are images of despair. And yet, though in despair, the psalmist does not despair. Bones melt—the poet is weak almost to the point of helplessness. Tongue cleaves to jaw—the poet is dehydrated, all strength "dried up like a potsherd," so that to stand is no longer possible. Yet the poet is not helpless: God will help (v. 19). Even if the psalmist cannot stand, the psalm can call out from the place of utter weakness to God. The psalmist can expect God's help. The God that is called on is a deliverer, the God and deliverer of the fathers (v. 4), and is the psalmist's own God since the very beginnings (v. 9). The psalmist can promise to praise YHWH "in the midst of the congregation" (v. 22), and he can begin that praise in the concluding verses of the psalm.

Psalm 34

This psalm, a hymn of thanksgiving, contains one of the most beautiful verses in all of the psalms: "YHWH is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (v. 18). Still, it would not have been singled out above many other songs of praise for discussion here except for the literary form which it takes. It is an acrostic—a literary device in which each line begins with the successive letters of the alphabet. The Hebrew

alphabet contains twenty-two letters, and so the psalm has twenty-two verses. The artificial nature of this literary form may account for the lack of a sequential thought pattern in the psalm. Complete, or nearly complete, acrostics are also found in Pss. 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 (where each letter appears at the beginning of eight successive lines), 145; in Prov. 31:10-31; and in Lam. 1-4. There are no examples of acrostic in the New Testament, but the Greek word for "fish"—ichthus—which came to represent for early Christians the phrase "Jesus Christ, God's Savior" (Gk.: Iesous Christos, Theou, 'Uios, Soter) is a kind of acrostic.

Psalm 119

In this psalm the acrostic device is used to introduce each eight-verse section. This is the longest psalm in the Psalter, consisting as it does of twenty-two sections of eight verses each. The psalm is a long meditation on the Law. Though it meanders here and there in rather restless (and, to many present-day readers, repetitious) fashion, it has a core around which the thoughts of the writer revolve—the Law of YHWH is decisive in every sphere of human life. Indeed, as Artur Weiser points out, "It is possible to deduce from the psalm a full-fledged 'theology' of the Law, in both its theoretical and practical aspects" (p. 740).

Throughout the psalm runs the sentiment that the Law of YHWH is a blessing. There is no suggestion that keeping the Law is a burdensome thing, for through the Law comes true happiness. As Weiser points out,

A piety such as is expressed in the psalm, according to which God's word and law take the place of God himself and his wondrous works (v. 13), are even worshiped (v. 48) and become the source of that comfort which as a rule is bestowed upon man by the divine saving grace (vv. 50, 92), carries with it the germs of a development which was bound to end in the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes of the New Testament record. (pp. 740-41)

Before we feel smug that we are not among the Pharisees, however, consider that Christians today tend to translate "Torah" exclusively as "law" and to assume that word means a narrow and legalistic way of life.

Psalm 58

The loftiness of worship which the psalms present should not make us think that worshipers of YHWH were anemic and weak, like some of the saints portrayed in nineteenth-century stained glass. This psalm is an earnest curse invoked as an act of worship upon the psalmist's enemies. If YHWH does indeed expect faithfulness and obedience from the people and promises blessings to those who delight in the Law, then it follows that YHWH will bring terrible judgment on those who are wicked. The psalmist, confident in God and in the psalmist's own faithfulness, expects enemies to receive punishment and prays to God that it may come. The description of the fate that the psalmist holds out to the enemies is so graphic that few Christian congregations today would care to read it aloud in public. The wrath of God upon sinners is part of the biblical picture. Sentimentalism alone cannot suffice to portray that love which is willing to bring judgment as part of its order of justice. There is a profound aspect to this. All the action is left to God. The Psalm is not a "fight song" after which the participants go out and wreak vengeance themselves; rather, they pour out their emotion to YHWH and leave the enactment to God. These psalms, probably used in covenant renewal ceremonies and at other times when the tradition of the people of YHWH required special remembrance, recite the saving history of YHWH. While Ps. 105 and Ps. 106 retell the story of God's acting in and for the people, the story is given different interpretations in the two psalms.

The bulk of Psalm 105 is narrative. The story of God's great deeds on behalf of the people is told from its smallest beginnings in the seemingly aimless wanderings of the patriarchs through the Exodus from Egypt, the miracles of the wilderness wandering, and the gift of the land. Throughout the narrative, God is the actor. The people who share in the events, however great their names in the chronicle of history, sink into the background. In this story they are of little significance, for this is not simply history; it is a hymn, a celebration of the power of the God who works in history.

The purpose of this God who works in history has to do with the covenant. The theme of the narrative portion of the psalm is stated clearly in the "covenant formula" of vv. 7-9:

He is the LORD, our God; his judgments are in all the earth. He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac.

The covenant community has gathered to sing, to rejoice in the presence of their God, who established covenant with their ancestors, promising them the land for an inheritance; this God has kept that promise and shown a divine order that binds every age and every part of the earth, so that indeed "his judgments are in all the earth," embracing the entire world.

This cannot be a historical statement. A hymn is not history. The hymn is finally a profession of faith for the people of Israel, for God's acting in history is a matter of faith. The events in themselves, however exciting, are not of greatest import, but God in the hearts of the people reveals that in those events God is remembering "his holy promise." And so their hearts respond in praise of God's name and in obedience to the commandments, the "statutes" and the "laws," of the covenant.

In structure Psalm 106 is very similar to Psalm 105. Each begins with a hymn of praise; the bulk of each is taken up with a recital of God's saving deeds in the history of the people Israel; each concludes with a doxology: "Praise the Lord." No doubt this similarity in structure exists because the psalms played similar roles in the liturgical tradition of Israel.

Psalms 78, 105, and 106

The psalms' similarity in structure does not hide a deep difference in tone between them. Psalm 105 recites the history of the saving acts of God. Psalm 106, on the other hand, tells of the disobedience and ingratitude of the people. Psalm 105 ends up resembling most a hymn of thanksgiving. Psalm 106 is to be compared rather to a national lament. The psalm opens with a joyous question: "Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare forth all his praise?" (v. 2) The answer to the question—those "who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times"—becomes an occasion for sobering reflection, for "Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly" (v. 6).

The recitation that follows is a rehearsal of that iniquity: the building of the golden calf and idolatry in the land, the sacrifice of sons and daughters to false gods. How often the people "forgot God, their Savior" (v. 21).

Their unfaithfulness has always been met with faith. As many times as God delivered the people, they were rebellious and in their iniquity they were "brought low" (v. 43). "Nevertheless he regarded their distress, when he heard their cry. For their sake he remembered his covenant and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love" (vv. 44-45).

Whether the history of God's covenant with Israel is remembered as an unparalleled example of God's grace,

or as a dreadful example of human sinfulness, it can end in a song of praise. For God is grace unparalleled. Because God's love is steadfast, God forgives and forgives. And the covenant remains intact, simply because it is God's covenant.

Psalm 137

We already have looked briefly at this psalm which expresses the plight of the Jews in exile, their longing for Jerusalem, and their perplexity over living in a foreign land. Verses 7-9 should be noted—once again curses are called down upon the hated Edomites, the kingdom southeast of Judah that hurried to take every advantage of the weakness of the returning Jews.

Weiser suggests that the psalm's flow from melancholy recollection, to indignation at mockery, to wrath (previously restrained), to "a blind hate and rage which [the psalmist] is no longer able to master" (p. 794). But there is more than rage in the final verses of the psalm; there is faith in the power of God—a faith earnestly sought. Finally, "the reason why the psalmist calls down God's punishment on the enemy is in order to show with whom the final decision rests, whether with men who blaspheme in their arrogant mockery or with God who is not mocked. For his own sake YHWH cannot tolerate infringement of God's own majesty by the enemy's mockery. This is the ultimate concern of the psalmist which we must not fail to see, even though it is obscured and suppressed by his subsequent words of blind hate and vulgar rage" (p. 796).

Psalms 146-150

These psalms are sometimes called the "hallelujah psalms." Each one begins with the word "hallelujah," which means "praise YHWH." Note especially Ps. 148, in which all of creation—beginning with the heavens and moving through the waters above the firmament; the heavenly bodies of sun, moon, and stars; the earth and the seas; the weather; all things that grow on the land; and finally humankind—is called upon to give praise to YHWH. Verse 14 makes reference to the "horn," a symbol of strength, which YHWH has raised up for the people. This is a reference to the "anointed one," and probably expresses a future hope for the Messiah. The form of this psalm, with its call to all the created elements to praise YHWH, is similar to the "Song of the Three Young Men" in the Apocrypha (pp. 209-12, in the last section of the Oxford Bible). The "three young men" are those mentioned in the story of Daniel as having been cast into the fiery furnace. This song has been used for centuries in Christian worship, usually referred to by the Latin words of its opening verse, Benedicite, omnia opera Domini—"All the works of the Lord, praise." The same progression from the highest levels of creation to humankind is followed, but it is carried further, to Israel and to particular classes of people within

Israel—priests, servants of YHWH, spirits and souls of the righteous, and all those who are holy and humble of heart. The apocryphal book was composed in the second or first century BCE. Psalm 148 is probably earlier and may have been used by the writer of the "Song of the Three Young Men" as a model.

Psalm 150 is the concluding doxology for book five and provides a finale for the entire Psalter. The word translated "trumpet" in v. 3 is shophar (SHOW-far), a ram's horn which was sounded as a call to announce the opening of worship at specific occasions. It is not a trumpet in the modern sense—it is a liturgical rather than a musical instrument.

This brief survey provides only a small sample of the wealth of the Psalter. This much alone, however, should be sufficient to demonstrate that the worship of the "second temple" was not simply a rigid, legalistic exercise of prescribed ritual as it has often been portrayed. The experience of the Exile had brought home to the Jews the terrible consequences of faithlessness to the covenant. As the codes found in Leviticus attest, the

priests insisted that atonement must be made for sin, and the note of celebration which had probably characterized the pre-exilic sacrificial cultus was giving way to a more purposeful and penitent approach to YHWH. The interpretation of the fine points of the Law by the rising class of scribes eventually resulted in a narrow and burdensome legalism. The Psalter preserves much of the richness of pre-exilic worship and combines it with the wider and deeper understandings that came from the experience of the Exile and the teachings of the prophets.

The Use of the Psalter Through the Centuries

A vivid picture of how the use of the psalter spread throughout the Christian world is given by the historian Eusebius (CE 260-340): “The command to sing psalms in the name of the Lord was obeyed by everyone in every place: for the command to sing is in force in all churches which exist among the nations, not only the Greeks but also the barbarians throughout the whole world, and in towns, villages and in the fields.”

The picture is exaggerated, of course, but Eusebius is right in his general verdict. The language of the psalms, with its profound influence on Christian thought, has always been heard in the worship, common prayer, private devotion, and even the daily work of Christian people. “When other passages of scripture are used in church,” Ambrose wrote in the same century, “the words are drowned in the noise of talking. When the psalter is read, all are dumb.” Clement of Alexandria says: “We praise God as we till our lands; we sing to him hymns as we are sailing.”

The practice of singing the psalms was known to Paul (cf. Eph. 5:19). We can assume that the “psalms” included other compositions than those of the Psalter itself. In a famous letter to the emperor Trajan, an imperial administrator in Bithynia named Pliny described the antiphonal singing of the psalms by those present at worship on Sundays before dawn. It is likely that in its primitive form such antiphonal singing followed the style of the synagogue, where a soloist chanted the psalm, with the people repeating the same refrain after each verse. We may also assume that the singing to which Pliny referred was part of the Sunday Eucharist.

As the Eucharist evolved in the churches of the east and west, the Psalter came to occupy a large and significant place within it. In the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, for instance, in the first antiphon for an ordinary Sunday—an antiphon here is probably the descendant of the old responsorial method just described—the first four verses of Psalm 65 are used. A fitting prayer for the opening of the liturgy, the verses invite the nations to worship God because of his mighty works. The language of the psalms wove the familiar themes of creation, sin, judgment, and redemption into the texture of the rite, for it was language that seemed especially fitting to become the common prayer of the church. To the present day, the liturgies of the orthodox churches are among the most richly scriptural to a large extent because of their use of the Psalter.

Outside the liturgy of Sunday, however, there slowly evolved a pattern of common—and at times private—prayer in which the psalms came to be sung through in sequence. Certainly, when a fourth-century pilgrim named Egeria (or Etheria) came to Jerusalem, she found a service resembling one of the canonical hours that we find later in the daily office of monasteries and cathedrals. What she called “the first morning service” on Sunday included psalms, intoned by a priest, deacon, or other cleric in turn, to each verse of which the people responded with a refrain. The picture of Eusebius is at least close to the truth. From daily prayer meetings in the homes of especially devout Christians to the patterns of more monastic kinds of communities of which Egeria provides evidence, psalms have been the regular accompaniment of the common and private prayers of the church and its people. For early Christians, their texts contained the mystery that they saw revealed in Jesus Christ and which continues in the church. Tertullian tells us that in the agape or love feast with which he was familiar, one worshiper after another would come forward to sing God’s praise, using, Tertullian says, either a scripture text—presumably a psalm—or an original composition. As Augustine expressed it, in the

psalms it is “Christ and his church” who speak, pray, and weep. So the church from the first thought of the psalms as part of its own inheritance. Each time they were recited, new life was breathed into them, as it were, and they in turn provided new enrichment. To this early period—say, the first four centuries—we can also trace the rise of what are later known as the canonical hours. Tertullian in the third century recommended that prayers should be made at the third, sixth, and ninth hours. No reminder should be necessary, he remarked, of the obligation to pray morning and evening. Perhaps as early as this we can find the origin of what were later called the offices of matins, terce, sext, none and vespers. Two other hours, prime and compline, seem to have originated in the monastic communities.

Early monasticism, a predominantly lay movement, developed its own specific liturgical life. Dedicated to constant prayer, and usually in separation from the common life of the church, monks and nuns came to use the language of the psalms as the language of prayer par excellence. In their liturgical use of the Psalter these communities (particularly those associated with Basil of Caesarea in the east and with

Benedict in the west) made two chief contributions: one, the setting aside of particular times in the day for prayer—usually a night office and seven day offices—and the other, the recitation of the Psalter in its entirety over a given period of time. Benedict (CE 480-546), was the first to organize the recitation of the psalms on a complete and daily basis and to allocate certain of the psalms to certain hours. Largely as a result of his reasonable and practical approach to the daily office, the celebration of the hours became the prayer of the whole church, sung or said for all by communities representative of the whole.

The early church had given encouragement to the singing of private compositions as well as the psalms. By the fourth century such private compositions were forbidden, largely through fear of heresy, and the Council of Laodicea in 363 laid it down that only “the book of the hundred and fifty psalms” should be used in the church’s daily prayer. Thus, the early pattern of singing the psalms in private homes and later in monastic communities now yielded to a pattern in which the psalms alone, sung continuously over a certain period—a week or a month, for instance—gave voice to the church’s praise. We begin to see, particularly as we come to the end of the first millennium, the psalms used in cathedral worship at set hours, and in local parish churches at similar hours, as the supreme voice of the church at prayer.

The use of the Psalter as a vehicle for common prayer continued, though in an altered and at times diminished way, during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the Church of England the services of Mattins and Evensong made their official appearance in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer. The chief purpose of the new offices devised by Cranmer was to secure the orderly reading of scripture. Nothing should interfere with the people’s hearing of God’s Word. The prayer of the church was expressed, as in the past, in the language of the Psalter, recited now over a month in the typical pattern of psalms—lesson—canticle—lesson—canticle, followed by the Apostles’ Creed and prayers.

For John Calvin, too, the Psalter remained the language of Christian prayer; he accepted it as the immediate composition of the Holy Spirit. But since for Calvin the liturgical chant of the Roman church, particularly the Gregorian, made any popular participation impossible, he made two changes which subsequently affected all Reformed or Presbyterian worship: he arranged to have the psalms put into meter, and he found good composers to write or find suitable tunes.

Psalms found in Luther’s Deutsche Messe (1526) have always occupied a large place in the worship of the Lutheran churches. The translation of the Psalter in the present Lutheran Book of Worship is the same as in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, a revision of Miles Coverdale’s Psalter, which has stood the test of nearly half a millennium of usage. Thus two of the major English-speaking churches today have a common translation of the Psalter.

Vatican Council II simplified and rationalized the daily offices as they had evolved in the breviary or liturgical book of the Roman rite, particularly in the form to which they had evolved by the 16th century. In this revision the two most important offices

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are now lauds and vespers, together with an office of readings that can be used at different times. The psalms are fewer in number than in the old Roman breviary, and the Psalter is distributed over a four-week period. The New Testament is read in its entirety as is almost all of the Old Testament. A wide range of patristic writers is drawn from in the readings. The purpose of the office, the Council stated, is “to sanctify the day” and take into account the modern conditions in which life has to be lived.

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End of Chapter